The Church That Jesus Is Building and Churches That Men Are Organizing

BOOKLET—SEVEN

By
J. F. BURNETT
Minister in the Christian Church

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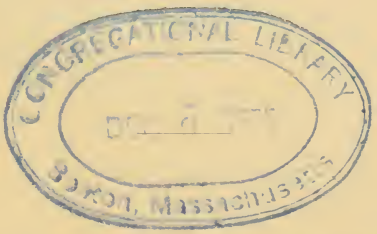

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FOREWORD

"The Local Church" is an address delivered by John Franklin Burnett, D. D., in 1922 before the Pastor's Conference at Palmer College and asked to be published by the pastors at that Conference and also by the Western Christian Convention. It is published for free distribution and will be sent out on request to anyone sending postage to The Christian Publishing Association, Dayton, Ohio.

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Fraternally,

O. W. WHITELOCK,
Secretary for Publishing.

"THE LOCAL CHURCH"

There is "The Church" and there are churches. The Church, Jesus himself is building upon the rock, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. With its construction, its membership, its laws, its activities, we have nothing whatever to do. Jesus is building it, and will at the last present it to himself not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing—THE CHURCH OF THE LIVING GOD. THE PILLAR AND GROUND OF THE TRUTH.

From the rocky isle of Patmos, John saw The Church; he heard the redeemed sing; he saw their white robes; he looked upon their crowns of glittering gold; he caught glimpses of their heavenly beauty; he beheld them as they encircled the great white throne, singing the song of the redeemed; and he said, "Innumerable! no man can number them." What John saw was the Church that Jesus Christ had built upon the Rock, and was presenting to Himself, a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

That is the Church into which I was born by repentance toward God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The angel recorded my name in the Lamb's Book of Life, and then I united with a local congregation, where my name is recorded, and with which I co-operate in the activities of

the people of God, and it is about that church with which I united that I am to speak today. That church was a definite organization. It had a local territory, a local name, a local membership, and localized activities. It was not wholly unlike other local churches, but it was a distinct and separate organization, with a personal identity that none other could claim.

It is well that here and now we should say that a Christian Church is a congregation of believers in Jesus Christ, united in covenant, worshiping together, associated in the faith, and the fellowship of the gospel; practicing its precepts, observing its ordinances, recognizing and accepting Jesus Christ as the rightful ruler and supreme head of all; the members each and all taking the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice, and dwelling together in the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace. A Christian Church is an independent unit, but not an isolated unit; it is a unit among a multitude of units, which form one great whole. A Christian Church, when constituted according to the New Testament, is an independent congregation of believers with full right and authority to decide all matters concerning itself, its decisions being final, and free from review, modification, or change by any other body of believers.

Both the fact and the identity of the local Church are recognized and spoken of throughout the entire New Testament scriptures. There was

a Church at Jerusalem, and one at Antioch, one at Cenchreae, one at Corinth, one at Ephesus, one at Smyrna, one at Pergamos, one at Thyatyra, one at Sardis, one at Philadelphia, one at Laodicea; and others are mentioned as having their existence and holding their worship in private houses (1 Cor. 16: 19).

All the warnings, rebukes, counsels, and encouragements of the New Testament scriptures are addressed to the churches as independent units, each, as such, being responsible to God.

These local Churches may unite, federate, and combine until they become world-wide, but they can never lose their individual and independent identity and character.

THE CHURCH AT JERUSALEM THE MODEL

There was a time when the whole Church—the only Church—that had a visible existence was at Jerusalem, and it may be concluded that it would be made the model Church in all the fundamentals of Church life.

Some of the apostles were present during their entire lifetime, so that when any matter came up for consideration, or for apostolic definition, they were there to render judgment and to give assistance, thus making the Church at Jerusalem model and effective in all its relations to the Kingdom of God.

The following things are mentioned of that first Church:

1. The members continued steadfast in the apostles' teaching and doctrine.

2. The members continued steadfast in fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayer.

3. The members chose a competent number of deacons.

4. The members recognized the presence and authority of the apostles.

5. The members, so far as known, chose their own bishop, or pastor.

6. The members were thoughtful of the claims of each other.

7. The members consecrated their possessions along with the consecration of themselves.

8. The whole Church was evangelistic in character, in tone, and in conduct.

We may conclude with absolute certainty that the Church at Jerusalem continued steadfast in the apostles' teaching, and doctrine, and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in prayer, as a matter of duty, and that as a matter of duty it selected and ordained the seven deacons, and as a matter of duty it recognized the presence and authority of the apostles. The same is true of all else that it did; and we may conclude with unquestioned assurance that what was the right and duty of the Church at Jerusalem, is the right and duty of the Church anywhere. All that inhered in the Church at Jerusalem inheres in the local Church now. What the Church at Jerusalem did, the Church at Corinth, and the Church at Antioch,

and the Church at Thyatyra, and he Church at Pergamos, and the Church at Sardis, and the Church at Philadelphia, and the Church at any other place, had a right to do. Now it is equally certain that what was true of the Church at Jerusalem, in this respect, was true of the Church at Antioch, and Corinth, and all the others, and it is true of all the local churches today. The Church at Antioch may have been very much like the Church at Jerusalem, but in no sense was it subservient to it, nor did the Church at Jerusalem ever try to exercise any authority over it, or over any other Church of that time. All the churches organized by the apostles were distinct, independent bodies. Each Church managed its own affairs, absolutely independent of every other Church and never recognized any human control or authority outside of itself. There was nowhere an association of churches under one common ecclesiastical judicatory. Jesus Christ intended that His followers should form themselves into churches (not sects) and when in Matthew 18: 17, He says, "Tell it unto the Church," He has in mind the local Church in the place where the offense was committed. In this final appeal of the aggrieved party it is not to be supposed that the whole body of believers could be gotten together. The Church mentioned, therefore, must mean the local congregation. In the case of the licentious man, Paul refers both the exclusion and the restoration to the Church at Corinth (1 Cor. 5: 1-5;

2 Cor. 11: 4, 5). He directs the Church at Corinth, when "gathered together" to "put away the wicked man from among yourselves," and afterward this punishment, which was inflicted of many was to be remitted by the same, when the offender had repented. Thus also, he directs the Church at Rome to "mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling and "turn away from them." The Lord in His epistles to the seven churches of Asia, clearly holds each Church, as such, wholly responsible for its doctrine and its discipline; but had these churches been recognized, Episcopally or Presbyterially, the rebukes for unsound doctrine and life would have been directed to the session, or the presbytery, or to the bench of bishops, and not as they are to the local independent congregations. There is not to be found in all New Testament history a single example of a Church subordinating itself to an organization outside itself; but in all the counsels, in all the rebukes, in all the warnings, in all the encouragements, each one is recognized as independent and accountable only to God. The fact that the Church at Jerusalem had chosen seven deacons, did not obligate the Church at Antioch to choose seven. That the Church at Antioch should have deacons comes within the necessities of its life and activities, but the number is quite a different thing, which illustrates the independence of the local Church in all matters pertaining to its own life and activities. It seems

conclusive that each Church of the Christians which meets in one place for religious worship, and for the carrying forward of matters pertaining to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, is a complete Church within itself, and as such is supreme in its own domain. Having entered into a covenant of faith it has the right and the authority to perform anything and everything pertaining to itself in matters of government, in matters of business, in matters of worship, in matters of finance, indeed in all matters pertaining to its own life and labors and in no sense is it accountable to any other Church for its doctrine or its conduct, even though the other Church be of "the same faith and order." There is no evidence whatever that the primitive churches were national, or even provincial. There were churches in the province of Asia Minor, of Galatia, of Judea, of Samaria, but not one word is recorded that would lead us to suppose that these churches were in any sense provincial in any of the localities in which they were found.

The Church at Jerusalem met at one time and at one place for worship, so did the Church at Antioch, so did the Church at Corinth, so did all the other churches of that time, and so they do today, so they should have done, and so they should continue to do. It seems quite conclusive that each of these churches was independent of each and all the others. No other Church no matter where located, no matter how rich or influential, had any right whatsoever to assume arbitrary authority

over another, no matter how small in membership, or poor in purse that other one might have been. Each one of these independent units was absolutely supreme in its own domain, and while they exercised no authority over any man's faith or brought any compulsory power to bear upon the conscience of any, they did manage their own affairs in the way that approved itself to them. Much and good authority could be cited outside the New Testament in favor of the independence of the local Church in the days of the Apostles. Gibbon says, "The Societies which were instituted in the cities of the Roman Empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution. Such was the mild and equal constitution by which Christians were governed, more than a hundred years after the death of the apostles. Every society formed within itself a separate and independent republic." The late Archbishop of Dublin, (Bishop Whateley) says, "It appears plainly from the sacred narrative that though the many churches which the apostles founded were branches of one spiritual brotherhood, of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the heavenly Head—though there was one Lord, one faith, one baptism for all of them, yet they were each a distinct, independent community on earth, united by the common principles on which they were founded, and by their mutual agreement, affection, and respect; but not having any one

recognized head on earth, or acknowledging any sovereignty of one of these societies over others." Mosheim says, "the independence of the primitive Church is as clear as noonday." It is safe to conclude that the Scriptures teach that a visible congregation of believers in Jesus Christ, having associated together in a covenant of faith and fellowship in the gospel, remaining steadfast in the teachings and doctrines of the apostles and in fellowship and in the breaking of bread, and in prayer, and having accepted the Holy Bible as the rule of faith and conduct, meeting at stated times for worship, is a Christian Church with all the rights, privileges, and duties of the Church at Jerusalem, and that in the domain of its own life it is absolutely supreme.

From every viewpoint, from every angle of observation, the local Church is a perfect Church, with absolute rights and privileges which cannot be limited, annulled, added to, or changed by any other Church in all the Kingdom of God. Of course in so far as it combines or unites with other churches in conference or association work, just so far does it obligate itself for co-operation, but no further, and unless hindered by the terms of association has a right at any time to withdraw.

The local Church has the right of deciding all matters which are not already decided by Scripture. Such things as may be determined by "Holy Writ," become unchangeable law to the Church.

As has elsewhere been stated, the time and the place of meeting, the order of worship, and all business matters, as well as the observance of the ordinances, are to be determined by the local Church. This right is inherent in it as a voluntary body, and its exercise is recognized as a duty by the reproofs administered to the whole congregation at Corinth, for disorderly conduct at the Lord's Supper. Furthermore, the epistles are directed to local Churches thus plainly, definitely, and forcefully recognizing the right, as well as the responsibility of each Church as a congregation with reference to conducting its own affairs.

The local church has no right to adopt a creed, not even the Bible. The right to adopt the Bible, as a creed, implies the right to reject it. The Bible is not to be adopted, it is to be believed and practiced.

It has no right to formulate a doctrine. The doctrine is written in the Book.

It has no right to appropriate a name, except for local identification. The church that Jesus is building on the rock is The Christian Church. It has His spirit, His character, and His name.

It has no right to limit its membership by sectarian tests. Rules that bind men's conscience are scripturally forbidden.

It has no right to the name that includes all the followers of Christ, if its test of fellowship exclude some of the followers of Christ—indeed if it excludes but one of the followers of Christ.

Doctor Weston was fond of saying, "The Church of Christ is One; it embraces all those who have been accepted of Christ as His real disciples; and, in its whole and its parts, it should be so Organized, Named, and Governed as to include all and exclude none of those whom Christ has so accepted."

The local church has the right to determine the time and place, and determine the character of its public worship.

It has the right to own and control property under the provisions of the deed for such, and in keeping of the laws of the State in which it is.

It has the right to arrange with a minister, or ministers, for pastoral service, or for special meetings, and to agree with them the amount of compensation for such service.

It has the right to provide for the collecting of money for pastoral or other service for which it has arranged.

It has the right to have a choir, congregational singing, an orchestra, solos, duets, etc., or all of them, or none of them, as the church itself may determine.

It has the right to elect an official board to which it may entrust all the business of the church, or to have monthly, or quarterly, or yearly business meetings, according to the vote of the members.

It has the right to create departments of church activities, and appoint secretaries, or superintendents for them.

It has the right to organize a Sunday-school, a Christian Endeavor Society, a Ladies' Aid Society, a Men's Brotherhood, a Woman's Missionary Society, or any other organization which may be needed to carry forward the work of the Kingdom, which does not do violence to the teaching of the Scriptures.

It has the right to receive members and to dismiss them on stated days, in ways and by methods of their own choosing, provided the Bible instruction is not violated.

It has the right to determine the time of prayer meetings, communion services, and other special or extraordinary occasions.

It has the right to determine the number of deacons needed and to ordain them, and to determine the time of service, also to determine the names and number of all other officers needed for the carrying forward of the work which the Church may undertake to do.

It has the right to elect such officers for special services as may from time to time be needed, and to appoint committees for the same purposes.

It has the right to determine the time and to plan for the special evangelistic meetings which the Church may desire to hold.

It has the right to determine the location, the size, the style, and the cost of its house of wor-

ship, the time of its dedication, and the order of service.

It has the right to hear from an offended brother of the effort made toward a reconciliation, and to have it hold to the Church if he failed to effect reconciliation.

While yet in my first pastorate I had a church trial, and were I to have many more, I should conduct them as I did that first one. There was a man in the membership of the church, who had been reared and disciplined in an ecclesiastical church. He felt himself offended by one of his brethren, and promptly preferred charges against him. These he handed to me, with the request that the case be called as promptly as possible. I at once announced that charges had been preferred by Brother ——— against Brother ——— and that the charges would be considered on Saturday evening, preceeding my next Sunday service. Saturday evening came, and so did the folks. The house was crowded to the doors. After singing and prayer, I stated the object of the meeting, and called the men forward. The offended man came up one isle of the church, and the offender up the other. As they stood before me, holding the Bible in my hand, I reminded them that, as a church, we took the Bivle as our only rule of faith and practice, and that in all matters we were governed by it. I then read the words, "If thy brother tresspass against thee, go to *him* and tell *him* of *his* fault, between *thee* and *him* alone."

Said I to the offended brother, "Have you taken this first step in the proceedings?" He answered, "No." Turning to the congregation I said, "The case is postponed until Mr. ———— shall take the first step as required by our book of rules," and immediately pronounced the benediction.

On their way home that night, the offended brother sidled up to the offender, and said, "That preacher made a fool of both of us tonight." "No," said the other, "he simply followed the Bible instruction in the matter." The result was that they talked over their misunderstanding, the charges were withdrawn, and they became really good friends.

It has the right to carry out the Scriptural instruction to let such an one be to them as a heathen man and a publican.

It has the right to combine, unite, federate, or associate with any number of other local churches in conference relationship, or to form an association or federation with other local churches for aggressive work in the Kingdom of the Christ.

It has the right, unless by joining a conference it transfers its right to the conference, to examine candidates for the ministry, and to ordain them thereto. Indeed that was the usual way among the Christian churches during the early years and it is quite questionable whether the right of the local Church is displaced in matters of ordination even by its conference associations.

THE ORGANIZATION OF A LOCAL CHURCH

The local church, to be fully efficient, must be adequately organized. Politics are organized; labor is organized; business is organized; armies are organized; religion must be organized.

We have come to a new day. God is the same, but the world is not; Jesus Christ is the same, but the Spirit of God has opened the eyes of our understanding to a greater Christ, and a larger work, than the world has hitherto known. In this growing, changing world, only a growing, changing church can be all things to all men, that by all means she may save some. Let is be distinctly understood, however, that the change must be in the method only, and not in the character, nor the purpose of the church. A modern church is one with the old-time Christ, and the old-time truth, but with modern methods of procedure. A wheel on an ox cart is a wheel, as much so as it is on a Pierce Arrow Automobile, but the difference in the rapidity of its revolutions is quite noticeable to say the least. Many a successful merchant at a country crossroads has failed when he tried to run a department store in a large city, by the methods that gave him success in a small business, with a class of customers as different from his city trade as an African jungle man is different from the millionaire trader on Fifth Avenue, New York, and many a pastor has succeeded in the old-time way, with

the old-time folks, who sadly failed when he tried his old-time wooden mold board in the soil of modern human hearts.

Jesus was a great organizer. He organized the twelve into groups of two, and sent them forth with explicit instructions. He organized the disciples, and the multitude, when he would feed the hungry throng. It would not be difficult to find in his teaching, plans for missionary, social, evangelistic, and other departments of church organization, together with a Cradle Roll and Home Departments for Sunday-schools.

In the organized activities of the world is found proof that the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light—co-ordination of effort must be carried into every department of church life. The worship, the music, the devotional meetings, the missionary activities, in a word, everything the church does should be organized for the doing. In the organization of a church, two purposes must be included,

WORSHIP AND SERVICE

We worship God, and we serve one another. At the first the church was organized for worship only, but it soon came to a place where service as well as worship was demanded. The first step in the organization for service was the election of deacons. They were elected to serve. The origin of the office is found in the strenuous demands upon the ministry, and the necessities of the poor.

They were servants, and they were to serve. The first duty that devolved upon them was to settle a difficulty between Jew and Greek Christians. Some women had not gotten their share of the daily distribution of food. In the last analysis of the situation is seen the racial element—Greek, Jew. In the light of the Jewish characteristics it is not surprising that even in Jerusalem, Jacob would get the larger share of the pottage.

In organizing a church there should be first of all a covenant to which the names should be attached of all who are to enter into the organization. Usually such ones are called charter members. It were better to call them covenant members. After a sufficient number of names have been secured, a meeting should be appointed for the purpose of organizing a church. The order of service, might include a sermon on the Principles of the Church; the Meaning of Church Membership; the Blessing of Public Worship; the Church in the Community, or any other subject in keeping with the purpose of the meeting. The covenant should be read, and an opportunity given for other names to be added. The hand of fellowship should be extended one to another. This can be done, and quite impressively, too, by the members forming a circle when the minister turning to the right shall shake hands with all as he goes around, and immediately he starts the one next to him should follow, and so on in turn until every one shall have shaken hands

with every other one. When the hand of fellowship has been given, then the members should join hands and sing,

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love,
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

or

To serve the present age
Our calling to fulfill
Oh may it all our powers engage
To do our Master's will.

Immediately the organization is completed, the church should proceed to elect a full corps of officers, and appoint the committees that may then be needed.

The officers should be a pastor, a sufficient number of deacons, a clerk, a treasurer, and a board of trustees.

As soon as it can be done a constitution and a code of by-laws should be carefully prepared and adopted, and lived up to. Such constitution should not, indeed must not, intrude upon the rights and privileges of the members as vouchsafed to them in the Christian's Rule of Faith and Practice, or as expressed in the original covenant, but should have to do with all the business affairs of the church. The constitution and by-laws should deal with the control and use of all property belonging to the organization; the names, number, and duties of officers; the plan and duties

of an Official Board, and the appointment of all committees; and also it should definitely determine the term of service the election to any office imposes, and provide for the discharge from office any and all incumbents who fail to meet the requirements of the constitution and by-laws.

It is not an infrequent thing for me to be asked if deacons are elected for life. To such inquiries I always answer, "I hope not," but that if it should be so stated in the constitution of the church, or had been made known at the time of their election, they are, but otherwise they are not, and should not be. The ordination is for life, the service should be for a term of years. I am an ordained minister of the Word, and that ordination is for life, but the term that I may serve any particular church as pastor is not determined by the ordination, but by the will of the church which I serve. Once, when I was in the pastorate, a brother, who had been ordained a deacon in another Church, was received to membership. Soon afterward he said to me, "I suppose that I am now a deacon in this church." I said, "No, you are not." "Why," said he, "I have been ordained, and you have taken me into membership." "Yes," said I, "that is what we have done; we have taken you into membership, but we have not yet chosen you deacon, and most certainly did not by receiving you into membership." Later on he was elected deacon, but not until the Church was convinced of his fitness for the place.

OTHER OFFICERS OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

There are other offices which grow out of the character and conditions of the Church, and the work it has to do, and while there is no Biblical authority or example for them, or their occupants, there are many and valid reasons why they should be, one of which is, let all things be done decently and in order.

Clerk—Each local church should have a competent, faithful clerk, who not only attends the business sessions of the Church and its Official Board, but who keeps an accurate record of all proceedings of the Church, the names of the members, the date of admission, the date of baptism, whether admitted by letter or upon confession, date and reason for all dismissals and withdrawals, together with a brief history of the Sunday services, the attendance, the text of the sermon, the name of the preacher, and such notations as his judgment approves. The clerk of the Church should be the connecting link between the Church and all individuals and organizations with which the Church has to do.

Treasurer—Each local Church should have a treasurer, who should be chosen upon the facts of his honesty in business and his efficiency in service. Simply because one is good is not sufficient reason for electing one to a place of trust in the house of the Lord.

Trustees—The Common Law of the land provides that no trust shall fail for the want of a trustee, and each local Church should see to it that the legal number of competent trustees is elected in accordance with the requirements of the State laws, to whose care and keeping all Church property should be entrusted.

The importance of receiving persons into membership of the local Church is of so serious importance as to justify special attention and additional emphasis.

When one comes forward in the public audience and confesses Christ, should the Church be asked to vote upon one's reception? Yes, if such a one desires to be enrolled as a member of that particular body of believers.

"Repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ," brings one into the Church that Jesus is building upon the rock, and no one is voted into that Church. One must be born into it, but being born into the Church that Jesus Christ is building, does not make one a member of any local organization. Here are four or five different congregations in the same locality. They may all be of the same faith and order, and one is born into the Kingdom of God, and desires membership in one of the five, it seems to be perfectly proper for that local Church to extend to such applicant the blessing of membership by a hearty vote, and a good old-fashioned handshake. Such vote has nothing whatsoever to do with the ad-

mission of one into the Kingdom of God. We mistake when we conclude that receiving one into the local Church is the same as receiving one into the Church that Jesus is building, for with membership in the latter we have nothing whatsoever to do. The Lord adds to the Church daily such as are being saved. The local Church holds the supreme right in all matters pertaining to itself, and nothing could be more fitting than for such Church to vote membership to one who seeks it and whose life and conduct will harmonize with the rules that govern that particular congregation of believers. Times of meeting, the personnel of the Church officiary, the ability of the minister, the relationship of members, and many another thing may have to do in deciding one's choice of local membership. As far as known to the writer all fraternal organizations vote upon the reception of members. A man must not only be a mason, but he must belong to some local lodge of masons. The enrollment as a member of any particular lodge could not make him a mason, nor does the vote of the lodge granting him membership make him such, but because he is a mason he seeks to be enrolled. The vote of the local Church cannot make one a Christian, nor will the enrollment of one's name on any membership make him such, but because one is a Christian, one seeks such enrollment somewhere among some local body of believers.

By such membership one becomes specifically identified and acknowledges his obligation and responsibility to some locality and where his activities may be directed so as to accomplish the greatest good for the cause. When it comes to dismissing one from membership a vote is taken and indeed voting is the usual method of deciding almost every question among our churches, and an exception to this rule should not be made when one is to be received to membership.

A careful study of the question will show that Jesus laid the foundation of His Church on common sense principles and the world in its organizations has adopted His principles of government and finds that they work satisfactorily, and local churches would do well to keep to the straight and narrow way marked out by the Master.

The fact that the Church in any locality is the Church in its organized capacity, and a sovereign body in itself, transacting its own business without interference or dictation from any other Church or outside body, either preachers or laymen, is a strong testimony in favor of its right and duty to receive by public approval any who might apply for membership.

The churches mentioned by Paul were not simply promiscuous gatherings of Christians for prayer and praise, but were Christians organized for service, to which the command "Let everything be done decently and in order," was given. Churches so organized are to transact business

for the Lord's Kingdom and the whole organization is to participate in all the business, so that when it comes to receiving members, a vote of that particular Church or congregation is certainly not only in order, but a very impressive and stimulating expression of their willingness to grant membership to the applicant, and if that be followed with an old-time cordial handshake it becomes all the more so.

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